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ABSTRACT

Nontraditional students in the community college can profit from their composition courses if these courses give them the chance to discover what words can do and to use that discovery to best serve their own interests and ambitions. To serve these aims, composition courses should be based on the following assumptions: students are to be accepted as they are, not as teachers might wish that they were, the cultural heritage of students is to be appreciated while at the same time they are to be equipped with the standard English that will admit many of them to the jobs they want; students and their work are to be approached in a positive, identity-affirming manner; and students are to be given guided practice in writing prose, supplemented by a therapeutic review of grammar and mechanics. Teachers should also recognize that changes in language can bring about changes in life by clarifying students' knowledge and by increasing their confidence in their ability to systematize information and experiences. (DF)

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VALID PHILOSOPHIES OF COMPOSITION

Ruth Couch

A teacher of freshman composition courses in the seventies should indeed have a strong ego. Ominous news assails the composition teacher from many directions. The newspapers report with appropriate alarums the decline in student literacy. The shapers of popular culture admonish us to go "back to the basics" without considering the possibility that some instruction may be basic enough in the first place. Pressures within the college also become insistent. One such pressure is presented by the so-called "new students." These students present a fascinating linguistic diversity, but at the same time they create the need for equal diversity in approaches to instruction. Higher education is in disfavor politically in many places, and thus budget cuts necessitate the crowding of classrooms to the point that the composition teacher runs out of enthusiasm and energy before reading the themes he or she feels obligated to assign. Then the concept of accountability appears, and with its advent the teacher conjures up visions of being sued because he passed a student whose skills later proved deficient on the job or in the four-year college.

In addition to these pressures, there are the perennial ones: the hours of planning, the unpredictable nature of the students' responses to the task of writing, and so on. On the lighter side, the English teacher also has an image problem. How many of us have had a party ruined for us when we were introduced to someone as an English teacher and heard, "Oh, dear! I guess then I'd really better watch my language." This problem

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may go deeper than one might expect at first. A person's language is so much a part of her whole being that she may feel that if her language is criticized, the critic somehow considers her unacceptable. One teacher finally decided to tell people who asked about his job that he was a snake tamer. He said that this guise did wonders for his social life. I've often been tempted to say I work in a paper mill, but I lack the aplomb to put this story over. Besides, in spite of pressures in school and out, I do enjoy my work. I am fascinated by the power of words, and I like to help others discover this power. I believe that the students in the two-year college can profit from their composition courses if these courses are based on valid assumptions. First, we can accept our students as they are and not try to pretend they are as we might have wished. Second, we can appreciate the cultural heritage of our students while at the same time attempting to equip them with the standard English which for many of them will be the ticket to the job they want. Third, we can approach both them and their work in a positive, identity-affirming manner rather than with a negativism born of a desire to enhance our own egos. Fourth, we can attempt to give them guided practice in writing prose, supplemented by therapeutic review of grammar and mechanics. Last, and perhaps the most intriguing, we can recognize that changes in language can bring about changes in life. With these points in mind we can give our students the chance to discover what words can do and to use that discovery in whatever way will best serve their own interests and ambitions.

The first assumption is that the composition teacher will accept the students as they are today, not as they were during some unspecified golden age when presumably high school preparation was better, adolescent minds

were not dulled by the influence of television, and students with low test scores were not encouraged to go to college. To speak of the "new" student in higher education has become a commonplace. And yet there is still a need to be aware of the wide variety of students now attending colleges, especially two-year institutions. Several segments of the non-traditional student population are appearing in ever-greater percentages.

The poor, the disadvantaged, and the academically unsuccessful are present in greater numbers as the colleges go to the people in an effort to make education more relevant--or to shore up enrollment statistics. These students have learned to expect failure, to feel that nothing good ever happens to them; and in general they have undergone an emotional detachment to avoid the pain of failure. Many students who make failing grades do so for the simple reason that they have never become aware of the possibilities within themselves. They see themselves as worthless, and they feel that the future holds little hope for them. Seeing no reason to use the abilities they have, they continue to be locked in their patterns of low achievement. To realize that they are valued persons who have real stories worth telling is to begin the tedious process of reshaping their version of the possible.

Racial groupings are a second category of "new" students. Despite progress in revision of textbooks to provide points of identification for minorities, subtle problems remain. Perhaps some teachers have not examined their own background and discovered the prejudices left as a result of their early lives. The student who belongs to an ethnic minority will have some language characteristics different from those of standard English, but he will have a wealth of material from which to draw; and his writings can

enrich both his teacher and his classmates.

One of the most interesting and challenging of these groups is the mature or older student. Ten years ago this segment was practically limited to veterans and housewives. Today, as emphasis is placed upon career counseling in mid-life, increasing numbers of mature persons are changing jobs. These changes frequently call for academic training. The Sixty-Plus Program, with its financial relief for those of retirement age, brings in another segment--this time, the ones with a somewhat more intrinsic motivation. However eager the mature student may be, he will have little interest in sororities, dormitory regulations, and other topics given in textbooks for typical freshmen. Teachers need to provide counteracting influences that make this student feel included. The assets and liabilities of the mature student require sensitive handling. However deficient he may be in mechanics, he is likely to have so many advantages in organizational ability and so many experiences from which to draw topics that he may require a vastly different approach from that taken for, say, an eighteen-year-old high school valedictorian. The difference includes both substance and method.

Composition teachers have a unique opportunity to help all these students to accept their life experiences as valid and worthwhile. Eventually the day will come when all aspects of the college will be brought in line with the diversity in the student population. Until that time instructors can try to see that no student feels out of place for not being a typical student. Lou Kelley states in an article entitled "Toward Competence and Creativity in an Open Class":

> ...they won't learn unless we who would teach them start where they are. They can't understand new ideas unless they can relate them to their old ideas. They can't develop new attitudes and skills

unless they can fit them into the whole set of attitudes and skills they bring with them.[1]

The admission of students with a variety of needs and skills obligates the institution to make provisions for these students. A number of procedures have proved effective here. One of the most promising innovations is the conference method involving totally individualized instruction. This method has been used successfully in at least one two-year institution in Arkansas. In schools where class size cannot be reduced enough to make the conference method practical, other methods help the teachers to cope. Recently at Arkansas State University-Beebe the McGraw-Hill Basic Skills System test in writing became the basis for recommended placement in freshman English classes. Students whose scores indicated that they would profit from practice in mechanics or other aspects had the opportunity to enroll in a course designed to prepare them for regular English. They could also enroll in both courses at the same time if they wished and receive assistance with their problems in the regular class during the preparatory class. Students at the top of the scale formed a separate section in which not much review is planned. Also at ASU-Beebe a learning center is available. Students can work on individual projects or problems coordinated by the director. These activities may be initiated by the student or by the classroom teacher.

More important, however, than special courses or specific techniques is the attitude of the instructors. Teachers who perceive each of their students as persons of interest and worth are essential. Without this factor the finest hardware and the latest gimmicks will have little significance.

Respect for the student is indeed a critical factor. His home, his neighborhood, his culture, his appearance, and his personality as well as

his language all deserve to be treated with dignity. A certain amount of the discussion on the student's rights to their own language is purely academic--many of our students are going to go right on speaking and even writing their own language (whatever that may be) despite two semesters under our instruction. One young man, a farmer, stated effectively the case for retaining his language. In a well-organized paper, he pointed out a number of situations in which he felt that speaking standard English would not be an advantage to him. Basically, he expressed the idea that textbookish language would alienate him from the groups of which he wanted to be a part. His paper was excellent; he had used standard English throughout. The paper seemed to be an illustration of an important point: language requirements vary from situation to situation.

Yet there are many times when standard English fits the requirement. The student can still use his own language in his own group, but he needs to know that this language may handicap him in certain other situtions. Given the pragmatic orientation of many of our students, we do them a disservice if we do not provide them with the skill to compete in business and to manage the transactions needed for carrying on their lives effectively. No one today would maintain that we are all going to speak like a grammar text around our friends. Yet the time does come when the student capable of smooth use of the prevailing dialect has a definite advantage. A student needs to be able to speak without glaring errors, to write sentences that communicate effectively, and to use rhetorical skills in order to fulfill the requirements of jobs in most of the local offices. One way to bridge the gap here is to invite an employer to the class to speak about the language requirements in his office.

At the same time, the students can retain a respect for the language with which they grew up. This respect can be secured by class exchanges about the various dialects represented. Nancy Martin in New English, New Imperatives discusses this point. "Language is learned in our homes and social groups...different social groups have different life styles and different life styles select different parts of the environment as relevant."[2] Discussions of such differences as sentence patterns, grammatical features, and word choice cannot only help a student enhance his respect for his own linguistic heritage but also help him to understand the pluralism of his city or community. The differences are not treated condescendingly; they are considered appropriate for certain times and places.

If faculty members do come to terms with the diversity of their students and are able to see them as valued persons instead of just members of categories, then the English composition program can be based on positives and not negatives. The open-door policy has forced many instructors to deal with students who have grown accustomed to failure, to the deadening experience of gradually ceasing to expect that they can ever succeed in academic areas. However shy and non-assertive the traditional student may have been, he was unlikely to have reached the point that failure would simply confirm his expectations. Thus, solid unadulterated criticism was not fatal to this type of student, although in retrospect it is hard to see how it could have been beneficial except in very small quantities. Students who have little confidence may present an almost belligerent impression. Older students have much at stake too in being evaluated beside persons the age of their own children. From the first day of class, composition teachers will want to do everything possible to help students realize that they can experience

success.

The themes or other papers are a critical meeting point; both teachers and students realize that long-lasting impressions will be formed during the writing and the marking of the first theme. Thus this writing experience needs to have as many emotional traps as possible removed from it. Markings on this paper, especially, need to be positive. Rare indeed is the paper in which a perceptive educator cannot find something to praise, if only the fact that the sentences are varied or the verbs are exciting.

It is indeed a sobering experience to look at a theme one graded some time ago and try to imagine its impact upon a student who may already be ambivalent about the college experience. The paper, sprinkled with red marks ranging from awk to oh, no, not again to wordy explanations sometimes sarcastically toned, looks like the scene of a bad accident. Indeed, some teachers mark only the negatives. The idea that each student is a person with valid ideas worth developing has several implications for the grading process.

Granted that totally positive comments are not possible, something positive should be written on each effort. Another concern is that too many markings may be used and the student may be overwhelmed. Teachers should not feel that their professional competency is compromised if they allow some problems to escape unmarked. No one is going to concentrate on more than a few areas of change at one time anyway.

Negative comments can be made in a supportive manner. "You can strenghten this paper by adding details." "A complex sentence might work better here." Remarks like these will give the student directions for rewriting, and at the same time he can see that the teacher recognized the

value of his ideas. Of course, as teachers become acquainted with their groups, they can tell if an occasional startling criticism will be therapeutic at some point. But even then it should be infrequent, or it will lose its effectiveness and alienate the writer. In grading papers, too, one needs to be careful to avoid engaging in debates on opinions the student has expressed as long as he has reasonable support for them. Today's varied students may present ideas that some teachers tend to reject, but again the student is attempting something that has meaning. He does not need to add to his worries the additional one of having to slant his papers toward the personal philosophy of his instructor. Lou Kelley states:

> All students--the brillant and the slow, the enthusiastic and the indifferent, the aggressive and the meek--need to be assured that they know something that teacher and class will value... each student becomes a teacher.[3]

In-class discussions also need to be handled judiciously. The plan of reading a paper for comment can be effective if emphasis is kept on good points and interesting passages the writer might "play around with" to make more effective. It does not need to degenerate into a bear-baiting session, and it should be done first with the more confident students rather than with papers chosen at random. Conferences among students are effective as an alternate procedure in which class members can make use of what they already know.

An attitude of acceptance toward the individual is nowhere more important than in the theme-writing process itself. The experience of writing is essential to development. Students need a feeling that what they are doing here is related to where they are going and where they have been. The

problem of class size causes many instructors not to assign as many themes as they would like. In the two-year colleges of Arkansas there is considerable variation in the number of themes, but most instructors require at least eight themes or theme equivalents per semester and some attempt much more. In addition, journal-writing has been popular, as well as a variety of other techniques, some born out of desperation because of inadequate grading time.

For students who have been out of school for years or for those whose school experiences have conditioned them to expect failure, the blank sheet of paper is especially formidable. If instructors work on the assumption, however, that all students have worthwhile experiences to communicate, they will want to break the barrier between student and paper as rapidly as possible. The students' experiences and attitudes form the basis for the early assignments.

Since writing is based on talking, it is sometimes valuable for students to "talk through" their writing assignments before they put a word on paper. This process enables them to check the validity of the idea on which they are working and to decide upon an approach. Then, the student can write his material in rough form, being urged to cross out words, draw arrows for rearrangement, and in general to work for effective and clear diction, at this stage totally free from concern about spelling, punctuation, and other small problems. Some of the early productions may be flavorless accounts of "what I did on my summer vacation" or "the advantages of attending a small school," but the student at least has made a beginning if he has stated his views honestly. He can then be led to question these vapid early efforts in order to get to something resembling an experience. Questions like these

will stimulate the students to look at just one part of these ramblings and focus on the part of the events worth communicating. "Did you change your attitude toward traffic laws this summer while you were on vacation?" "Did you make any new discoveries about someone you traveled with?" and so on. Surely a whole vacation trip must not have been a total loss in valid experiences. Likewise, the trite defense of the small school has real possibilities. Students usually will assert that in a small school, faculty members are more concerned with students. They can be asked, "Were your teachers concerned about you?" "Who were some of these concerned teachers?" "What, exactly, did they do to show that they were concerned?"

Just as it is true that the unexamined life is not worth living, it is also true that the unexamined event is not worth writing about. Consciously or unconsciously, people search for a voice; and there is more delight in the simplest account, honestly rendered, than in any amount of repetition of tired phrases or rewording of someone else's ideas. Any comments on the first papers need to be more developmental than judgmental. When the students have achieved papers that represent genuine reactions to real experiences, they are then ready to supplement their presentations with ideas from their reading. If students write some themes in class and some out of class, they will learn to perform well in either situation; but always, attention to the stages of pre-writing is critical.

Finally, the effective teacher of composition recognizes the fact that language can change the lives of persons. These changes take place in a number of ways. First, writing clarifies knowledge. "If you can't write it, you don't know it" was the dictum of a venerable teacher some years ago, and it is a valuable guide for students. Writing also helps a person to

learn what his opinions really are. The whimsical query "How do I know what I think till I see what I say?" is not as illogical as it sounds. Many an opinion has been revised under the demand of explaining or supporting it in a paper.

Second, the ability to write well increases confidence. I am not talking here about an upward-mobile type of social confidence, although that should perhaps not be sneered at. Rather the important thing is the inner awareness of the ability to systematize information and experiences. The knowledge that one is able, from all the ideas floating around, to grab one, restrict it to a manageable size, and work it into a convincing presentation implies to the student the ability to impose a similar organization upon his life. George Stade discusses the goals of a composition course in "The Theory and Practice of College Composition."

> The aim of the course is to make the students write better, or to put it in another way, to improve their verbal thinking, to extend their ability to capture and create experiences with words. A number of susidiary aims...naturally follow.
>
> We want to help our students transform experience into knowledge, verbalize whatever they have done or undergone, so that they will know what these are. The one unambiguous sign...of someone's knowing that something is the case is his ability to say it in his own words, just as the proof of someone's knowing how to do something is his ability to do.
>
> We want, then, to help the students towards exploring, defining, and so in part mastering themselves and the world around them, which is largely a world of words... What one does with

words is to a large extent what he is, to himself as well as others.

We should like to lead students toward the means through which they might escape their inarticulateness...because inarticulateness...has political, as well as psychological consequences.

He (the teacher) can also be of use in extending the student's social, as well as political and intellectual, boundaries. He can introduce students to verbal communities--communities of ideas, of manners, of cultural style, of ideologies--other than those into which they were born. He can help to free them from provincial bias, which takes rumor for truth and takes tribal prejudice for the limits of choice; he can help to free them from the historical fix, which takes the reflexes of the present as the first and last word on how to say and do.

We should like the composition course, finally, to provide the student with verbal and intellectual tools for criticism and self-defense.... We should like him to be able to distinguish among arguments based on evidence or experience or observation or logic from those based on conventional usage, on authority, and on appeals to semi-conscious fears or desires. [4]

To be able to help students develop skills should be exciting. Teachers of composition have dozens of chances to expand their own knowledge and increase their insights into the diverse groups that make up the student population. For each of those names on that lengthy roster represents an expert in something. Teachers of composition can strike a good bargain; in return for the privilege of learning about the students' worlds and sharing their

areas of expertise, teachers can perhaps help them to develop abilities that will enable them to function in those worlds a little more effectively.

Endnotes

[1]In Ideas for English 101, ed. Richard Ohman and W. B. Coley (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1975), p. 17.

[2]Ed. Henry B. Maloney (Champaign, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1971), p. 75.

[3]Kelley, p. 11.

[4]In Ideas for English 101, ed. Richard Ohman and W. B. Coley (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1975), pp. 42-43.